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***Sattha*, Money and Idols:**

Intersections Between Capitalist Commodification of Thai K-pop and Buddhist Fandoms

Pornpailin (Pauline) Meklalit

APS 650: Capstone Project

Professor Brian Komei Dempster

May 21, 2021

Abstract

This study investigates the cultural, economic, and spiritual meanings, as well as the goals of activities carried out by both the K-pop fandom (specifically fans of EXO and NCT) and Buddhist devotees in Thailand—and their considerable degree of overlap. While Thai Buddhism is revered, K-pop fandom is stigmatized as an extreme, problematic form of behavior. This research builds parallels between these activities as forms of faith, which are mostly shaped by the same economic structures, with money as a medium that allows spiritual connection and comfort for fans. Moreover, travel and pilgrimages are physical and spiritual journeys that exist for both religious devotees and K-pop fans. Through analysis of numerous secondary sources and use of participant observations onsite in Thailand, this study illustrates scholarly discourse and the real-life experiences of those involved in religious and fan activities. The findings from this research indicate that both Thai K-pop fandom and Buddhism bear a striking resemblance in their faith rituals, practices, and capitalist-oriented activities; through their process of participation, both fans and religious devotees gain happiness and spiritual nourishment. Exploring relevant connections, this work offers insightful explanations that link K-pop and Buddhist subcultural communities, so that we can better understand the complex functioning of Thai society and culture.

Keywords: K-pop, Thai culture, Buddhism, fandom, Thai fan communities

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Introduction

The Korean Wave, known in Thai as “เกาหลีฟีเวอร์—Kao Lhee Fever,” started flooding Bangkok some time ago and has continued to do so for more than a decade. In Thailand, production and consumption patterns have been influenced by this imported culture in many ways. Young adults, both fans and non-fans of Korean pop culture, care more for Korean brand cosmetics, Korean style clothes, fashions, hair and nail trends or even stationery than their Thai equivalents. Korean food and snacks have also become increasingly popular. All of these things are becoming embedded in Thai society, largely thanks to an influx of K-dramas and K-pop songs and idols. Nevertheless, Thai K-pop fandoms are negatively stereotyped as deviant and pathetic by the media and non-fans. These fans are called, “ติ่งเกาหลี—Ting Kao Lhee,” referring to an obsessive follower or an extremely loyal fan of Korean idols. Those who do not understand this unfamiliar phenomenon call the craze of Korean idols “ไร้สาระ—Rai Sara,” meaning nonsense, as this is seen as not offering any benefit to society. They claim that these fans should be doing something more meaningful, such as studying. These stereotyped behaviors of Thai K-pop fans, whose image is associated with the flocks who create chaos at the airport when they greet their idols and want to get as close to them as possible, are branded as problematic, abnormal, and disgraceful by mainstream society.¹

Religion, on the other hand, commands respect as a part of the three pillars as represented by the Thai national flag symbolizing the unity of Thai nation. To be Thai means that you must

¹ Thansettakij, “ทอท. กุมเข้มติ่งเกาหลี ชูวินวาทสนามบินอาจโดนจับ” [AOT tightens the security, stressing that if Ting Kao Lhee create chaos, they can be under arrest], published June 28, 2019, <https://www.thansettakij.com/content/business/404165>. Airports of Thailand (AOT) warn Korean pop culture fans to not create chaos or disturb other passengers at the airport; otherwise, they will be legally charged.

belong to a religious community. In other words, religions in Thailand are not a choice since religious values are socialized and made familiar since childhood.² Among the three leading religions, Buddhism hybridizes with other belief systems —Hinduism, Brahmanism, Animism and Chinese deity worship—and is used by the majority of Thai population³, playing a vital role in their daily lives. Indeed, most everyday activities uphold Thai Buddhist values.

My research seeks to shift perceptions about K-Pop fans by focusing on the connection between certain behaviors and motivations of two K-pop fandoms— EXO-L⁴ and NCTzen⁵— and practices by devotees of three leading religions—Buddhism, Christianity and Islam—in Thailand. This work establishes links between fan activities and religious commitments while exploring to what extent faith and devotion are driving forces behind religious and fan activities. In this project, I examine the meanings and goals of activities carried out by fandoms and religious devotees in Thailand and their considerable degree of overlap. First, this paper analyzes how religious and fan activities are mostly shaped by the same economic structures and contain similarities in form and practices. Second, my analysis considers how both fandom and religion are capitalist-oriented activities that support and drive spiritual nourishment within Thai K-pop fandoms and Buddhist devotees. Third, I look at certain practices and their cultural, economic,

² To the contrary, Thai fandom of Korean pop culture is framed as a choice while being religious is expected in order to be a part of Thai society. Therefore, this legitimizes and adds to the deviant image of Korean fandoms.

³ National Statistic Office, the 2018 Survey on Conditions of Society, Culture and Mental Health, Bangkok: Statistical Forecasting Division (2020). Percentage of Buddhist population is 93.5%; Islam is 5.4%; Christianity is 1.1%; Others such as Brahmanism/ Hinduism/ Sikhism, Agnostic and atheists were less than 0.1%.

⁴ EXO fans are referred to by their official fandom name, EXO-L.

⁵ NCT fans are referred to by their official fandom name, NCTzen.

and spiritual meanings, including donations and pilgrimages, and consider the relationship between materialism, travel and happiness.

Along with a rigorous review and utilization of secondary sources, this research draws from both my own life and the experiences of other participants along with posts on social media platforms. Primary sources—namely Twitter—will be used to analyze fan activities. Using this type of data collection will allow me to obtain language and words of participants, which represent their own feelings and thoughts. Despite COVID-19 restrictions, I have conducted both actual and virtual fieldwork, using participant observation as a framework, by visiting and participating in fan-based and religious events. These sources allow me to better illustrate the real-life experiences of those involved and provide concrete examples of religious and fan activities that relate to consumerism, the purchase of merchandise, and participation in concert culture and fan events.

My research contributes new perspectives by comparing the phenomena of religion and fan culture, which are often treated separately. In exploring relevant connections, my analysis furthers our understanding of the complex functioning and dynamics of Thai society and culture. The findings of the research are relevant to larger frameworks of the Asia Pacific as they provide deeper explanations and a clearer picture for both scholars of K-pop and religion by linking these seemingly distinct behaviors and activities.

Beyond Rituals: Connecting to the World of Spirituality

In order to build a framework for comparing K-pop and religion, we must first review the existing literature. One area of scholastic emphasis is the identification of significant ritual performances of Thai Buddhists. It is typical for Thai devotees to offer Sangkrathan at temples, practice munificence, or donate money to charitable institutions and the poor.⁶ Being vegetarian, following 5-8 precepts, donating money to build a monastery, and becoming a monk are commonly practiced by Thai Buddhists as methods to obtain merits.⁷ However, the simplest and most frequent ritual activity is offering alms rounds to monks, nuns or novices who leave their monasteries at dawn and walk slowly to their neighborhood.⁸ Thai Buddhist devotees put food and other offerings—mostly money—into the alms' bowls, and then they receive a short chant from monks, which, for some, marks the beginning of their day. Sometimes, monks are invited to special events such as anniversaries of founding schools, grand openings of supermarkets or stores in order “to bless and inscribe the store as its opening as well as to sacralize Buddhist objects that occupy market shrines.”⁹ Such ritualistic activities require chanting from monks to spiritually ensure the future success of the business and good fortune. Even though we might not be able to see whether the inscribed or blessed stores are actually successful as those participants hope, we can see how blessings, especially from monks, assure participants that spiritual comfort and good fortune will arrive at some level. In turn, this reaffirms for Buddhist devotees that they

⁶ B. J. Terwiel, “The pursuit of beneficial karma,” in *Monks and magic: Revisiting a classic study of religious ceremonies in Thailand*, (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012).

⁷ Marja-Leena Heikkila-Horn, *Santi Asoke Buddhism and Thai state response*, (Abo: Abo Akademi Press, 1996), 165-171.

⁸ Justin Thomas McDaniel, “Rituals and Liturgies,” in *The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 135-136.

⁹ Ara Wilson, “The Sacred Geography of Bangkok’s Markets,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 23, no. 3(2008): 636; Justin Thomas McDaniel, “Rituals and Liturgies,” 136.

should continue performing these rituals. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to claim that these blessings are important rituals for Thai Buddhists that one must at least participate in as part of one's most important religious activities.

Visiting sacred sites such as shrines and temples is another significant ritual performance, which symbolizes the important Buddhist practice of worship and paying respect to the image of Buddha and other spirits. Well-known examples of sacred sites are Thao Maha Phrom of the famous Erawan Shrine in Bangkok, the Bodhisattva Kuan Yin statue in the Southern Thailand and Wat Chiang Hai associated with Luang Pho Thuat, who has become a powerful figure in amulet and image-building industry.¹⁰ A study by Wilson (2008) notes that Erawan Shrine is a commercial site that receives a lot of visits from tourists “who purchase offerings on the spot—candles and joss sticks, wooden figurines—and there are frequent performances by live dancers.”¹¹ Similarly, offerings such as fruits and flowers are given to a vernacular devotional object on the “Hing bucha — dedicated shelf.”¹² The worship of objects—such as amulets, statues and images associated to god-king, Kuan Im or prosperity monks—draws upon the spiritual power (saksit) and charisma (barami) thought to be inscribed in and connected to each object. As such, Thai Buddhist devotees feel less obliged to visit sacred places frequently.¹³ Moreover, it is a ritual performance in which they ask for protection from evil spirits. These acts

¹⁰ Mark Askew, “MATERIALIZING MERIT: The symbolic economy of religious monuments and tourist-pilgrimage in contemporary Thailand,” in *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, ed. by Pattana Kitiarsa, (India: Routledge, 2007), 89-119; Jovan Maud, “Sacred tourism and the state: Paradoxes of cross-border religious patronage in Southern Thailand,” in *Pilgrimage in the Age of Globalisation: Constructions of the Sacred and Secular in Late Modernity*, ed. by Nelia Hyndman-Rizk, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 93-117.

¹¹ Ara Wilson, *The Sacred Geography of Bangkok's Markets*, 633.

¹² Ara Wilson, 634.

¹³ Peter A. Jackson, “Royal spirits, Chinese gods, and magic monks: Thailand's boom-time religions of prosperity,” *South East Asia Research* 7 no. 3 (1999): 245-320.

of ritual performance are vital for Thai Buddhists to strengthen their sense of faith and religious community.

In turn, various sources concentrate on the underlying reasons behind performing rituals. The primary purpose of visiting a place of worship and practicing rituals is to seek blessings for good fortunes, ranging from health, better luck, wealth, and to ask for protection, business-related prosperity and even for the birth of babies.¹⁴ Thai Buddhism and politics are intertwined in this practice as well. Politician groups perform ritual ceremonies to increase social prestige, cultural capital, and outperforming other political groups.¹⁵ For political parties, it is one of the effective ways to draw more supporters since being religious, especially Buddhist, is seen to strengthen one's sense of Thai nationalism. Thai Buddhist devotees hold firm beliefs that worshipping deities and spirits who have certain superpowers will "help" their wishes become true. For example, Indra as one of the creator Hindu gods—who in the past was crucial for the agriculture system—is believed to help his followers overcome daily struggles or even win lotteries.¹⁶ For Thai Buddhists, the worship of sacred spirits and deities implies that life is strictly determined and cannot be changed by themselves.

To clearly demonstrate why Thai Buddhists practice rituals, I joined a candlelight procession online on Makha Bucha Day.¹⁷ The process was quite different from an on-site, in-

¹⁴ Mark Askew, "MATERIALIZING MERIT: The symbolic economy of religious monuments and tourist-pilgrimage in contemporary Thailand," 89-119; Jovan Maud, "Sacred tourism and the state: Paradoxes of cross-border religious patronage in Southern Thailand," 93-117; Andrea Whittaker, "Begging of Babies: The Sacred Geography of Fertility in Thailand" (working Paper No. 182), *Asia Research Institute*, National University of Singapore, 2012; Ara Wilson, 631-642.

¹⁵ Justin Thomas McDaniel, 154.

¹⁶ Pattana Kitiarsa, "Beyond Syncretism: Hybridization of Popular Religion in Contemporary Thailand," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2005): 480.

¹⁷ Makha Bucha Day refers to the gathering day between the Buddha and his first 1,250 disciples. It is considered to be one of the most important Buddhist festivals.

person activity. However, the structure remained the same, in which participants lit candles, joss sticks and carried candles. Then they walked with these candles around the temple while listening to the sermon. At the end, the online Buddhist devotees could make a wish. When entering the last section, I was able to click to randomly choose my wish numerous times. However, there was no place for me to write down my own wish. The given wishes ranged from the hope for wealth, luck and overcoming difficulties, profits, health and happiness. Interestingly, it seems that wishes related to wealth appeared quite regularly to me. In seeking for blessings, one takes an obvious step towards easing sufferings and ensuring a better life.

Through this participant observation and a review of scholarly and religious texts, we arrive at the same conclusion: that these practices are motivated by the hope for a good life. If we carefully examine the prime motive of worshipers, it is Merit (bun), an ethical concept of Thai Buddhism: through the accumulation of good acts, speech and thoughts we experience positive physical and spiritual results that strongly motivate Thai Buddhists to perform those ritualistic performances. One way to gain merit, as McDaniel explains, is giving (than) to ensure a better next life or good fortune in this life, which could be done through ordaining, offering alms, funding monasteries or libraries, going on pilgrimage or taking 5-8 precepts once a week.¹⁸ To put it simply, merit is a reward for your own actions—doing meritorious activities. Nevertheless, Jiemin Bao interestingly claims that “different kinds of giving are believed to accumulate certain amounts of merit.”¹⁹ In addition, merit is also associated with the idea of upper and lower realms as well. Most monastery murals in Thailand depict the upper realm as

¹⁸ Justin Thomas McDaniel, 138.

¹⁹ Jiemin Bao, “Merit Making: Transnational Circuits,” in *Creating a Buddhist Community: A Thai Temple in Silicon Valley*, Philadelphia; Rome; Tokyo: Temple University Press, 2015, 102.

heaven, the middle realm as earth, and the lower realm is assumed to be hell.²⁰ Importantly, “...guardian spirits are referred to as *thēwadā*, or those spirits who live in heaven because of merit accumulated in the past life.”²¹ This affirms that the more merit one makes, the higher chance that one can be in the upper heavenly realm. Hence, it implies an expectation within each ritual to determine the act of Thai Buddhist devotees such as offering alms to many monks at a special event at once rather than offering alms to a couple of monks each morning. Alan Klima suggests another underlying reason of meri-making that, “it is *mettā*—roughly speaking, loving-kindness, compassion, and generosity – that is the central sentimental value appealed to in eliciting participation in merit-making . . .”²² In other words, Thai Buddhists perform these rituals to show that they are generous and an ideal example of a good devotee. That ultimately explains why Thai Buddhists pay respect to these famous shrines mentioned earlier since doing so relates to, “[make] ‘merit’ (bun) they seek for another lifetime, and the comfort (*kwamsabai chai*) that they gain from the ritual of offering . . .”²³ Merit is a philosophical concept that surprisingly governs and even dictates certain attitudes of Thai Buddhist devotees. There’s intention behind each meritorious activity, which further complicates the activities of Thai Buddhist devotees that, in the end, attempt to reach a goal that seems most focused on themselves.

²⁰ Justin Thomas McDaniel, 127.

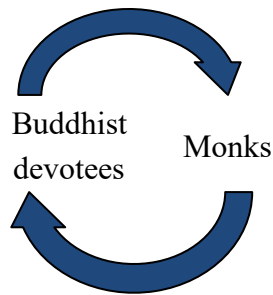
²¹ Philip P Arnold, “EATING AND GIVING FOOD: THE MATERIAL NECESSITY OF INTERPRETATING THAI BUDDHISM,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 14, no. 1(2000): 13.

²² Alan Kilma, “Thai love Thai: financing emotion in post-cash Thailand,” *Ethnos* 69, 4 (2004): 450.

²³ Mark Askew, 89-119.

Taking it to a deeper level, we can think of merit-making as a mutual concession in which both sides, monks and Buddhist devotees, gain benefits from each other. This reciprocal relationship allows monks to receive economic resources such as money to rebuild, repair and

Provide economic resources



Medium to grant merit

run monasteries from laypersons while acting as a service medium to provide merit for Thai Buddhists. Penny Van Esterik uses the example of a funeral, which “requires substantial investment on the part of laity. In addition, the laity are extremely dependent on the services of monks on these occasions . . . [Comparing the relationship between monks and laymen to mother and infants,] . . .

neither monks nor infants do any ‘works’ and both must be totally dependent on others for their survival...”²⁴ Therefore, both monks and Buddhist devotees must depend on each other to meet their end goals and satisfy their needs. Holding this idea in mind, we should not find it as a surprise to hear the phrase “happy business.” This term, coined in English by Luang Pho, the abbot at Wat Thai of Silicon Valley, explains the dependent relationship between monks and lay men:

A person who gives generously is considered a good Buddhist. A monk who raises money for the temple is perceived as a good monk. A resourceful temple is considered a good temple, as it can provide space for people to practice, heal, relax and better develop a sense of well-being. Without financial and material support and an entrepreneurial spirit, Buddhist temples could not operate; practitioners would have no place to go to confirm their moral worth, and monks would have no food, robes, medicine and shelter.²⁵

This interconnected system perhaps explains why monasteries have come up with several methods to raise income through the concept of merit-making. For example, donation boxes are

²⁴ Van Esterik, Penny. “RICE AND MILK IN THAI BUDDHISM: SYMBOLIC AND SOCIAL VALUES OF BASIC FOOD SUBSTANCES.” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (1984): 53.

²⁵ Jiemin Bao, “Merit Making: Transnational Circuits,” 119.

usually placed next to joss stick pots, so that they can be easily noticed by laymen.²⁶ This method is perhaps to make them think that donating money in a box is also part of ritual for making merit. When I visited Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, one of the most sacred temples in northern Thailand, during the 2020 New Year holiday, there were at least three donation boxes (fig. 1, fig. 2, fig. 3) that stated different objectives, but all of them were strategically placed where everybody who walked past could spot the box instantly. I saw several people stare at the box for a second, then they put money inside the box right away.



Figure 2. The donation box is put in front of the Buddha statue.



Figure 1. Donation boxes labelled for underprivileged students (left), and for education (right) in English while in Thai it is for “lunch” projects.



Figure 3. Interesting label with first sentence that states, “please join this merit-making,” instead of saying “please help donating to build a monastery.”

²⁶ Donation boxes are usually labeled in Thai as donating “for electricity bills,” “for land expansion and to build a monastery” or even “to help the underprivileged students.”

Another interesting case is งานวัดประจำปี-- the “Annual Monastery Festival.” Justin Thomas McDaniel, the author of *Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*, shared his observation during joining the Annual Monastery Festival at rural Kanchanaburi province. Along the way from Bangkok to his destination, McDaniel decided to count billboards advertising monastic festivals. Surprisingly, he said:

I counted 159 billboards advertising monastic festivals . . . Many of these signs depicted crystal balls to tell people that there would be fortune-tellers (or monks skilled at astrological prognostication) and amulet sales. Several signs mentioned the name of the abbot of the monastery, and some had emblazoned in bold print, “Rui ruai” (Rich, rich) to assure drivers that attending the festival would help them learn auspicious lottery numbers (boe huai) and gain merit to become rich in the near future.²⁷

This testimonial indicates that monasteries and monks are connected to the capitalist world, where finances are needed to effectively and fully function as a religious institution.

Scott argues that “wealth is a sign of merit...accumulate through the lens of global capitalism..., [That is why most of today Thai Buddhists] focus on ‘spiritual materialism’ — supporting the Sangha and making merit rather than key ideas such as anattā (not-self) and the three poisons (greed, hatred and delusion).”²⁸ Merit then becomes a currency. The more money is put into merit-making, the more merit Thai Buddhists can obtain. This even widens the gap between the rich and the poor since the wealthy will have more resources to maximize their merit-making. Ordinations and sponsorship are a great example here. Traditional belief holds that in every Thai Buddhist family, an ordained son will bring a great merit to his parents. In order to complete the ordination, there are ceremonies and receptions which require economic resources. A wealthy family is indeed equipped with available financial sources to sponsor these

²⁷ Justin Thomas McDaniel, 136.

²⁸ Rachelle M. Scott, *Nirvana for Sale? Buddhism, Wealth and the Dhammakaya Temple in Contemporary Thailand*, (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 157, 166.

ceremonies and receptions while “a poor villager who wishes to be ordained must either find a wealthy sponsor or pool re-sources from kin and neighbors. In the latter case he is unlikely to have a lavish ordination.”²⁹ This clearly illustrates the desire for improving economic wealth through worship of sacred objects and the belief in good fortune brought about by spirituality.

In sum, we can see how the rituals of Thai Buddhism are viewed with respect and regarded as sacred and presumed to be untouchable and unquestionable. Nevertheless, money remains a key to unlock one’s level of merit. Performing rituals is a bridge linking Buddhist devotees to spiritual comfort while relying on capitalist-oriented activities as a pathway or a channel that leads the way. It is undeniable that economics is intertwined with religious aspects and leads to mutual benefits for both Thai Buddhist monasteries and devotees.

Understanding the World of “Dom”: The Spirit of Fans

As with the practices of religious devotees, the literature on fandom is generally treated as a separate, distinct phenomenon. When we closely examine K-pop fan activities, however, we begin to see a connection to the idea of worship. First, there is an idol of worship that devotees follow. The activities of K-pop fans are organized around these idols, which include exchanging information and opinions, going to concerts on the promotional tours, greeting idols at the airport and “meeting the artists for their autographs.”³⁰ Several studies suggest that, by providing several

²⁹ Katherine A. Bowie, “The Alchemy of Charity of Class and Buddhism in Northern Thailand,” *American Anthropologist* 100, no. 2 (1998): 474.

³⁰ Ubonrat Siriyuvasak and Shin Hyunjoon, “Asianizing K-pop: Production, consumption and identification patterns among Thai youth,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8, no.1 (2007): 121.

digital platforms, some fans create fan arts—unofficial artworks, write fan fictions based on “romanticized relationships” among band members, and produce fansubs on popular Korean variety shows.³¹ These activities usually involve special codes and cultural value parameters, only comprehensible among certain fan communities. In the same way, three Buddhist days—Maka bucha Day, Visaka bucha Day and Asala bucha Day—are national public holidays, which revolve around the Buddha himself. On these days, Thai Buddhists visit temples to listen to sermons, engage in merit-making activities, and join candlelight processions while others enjoy their days off. As with fans, devotees celebrate, honor and form activities centered around their idols of worship.

Second, there is a private language and social codes of a community. When you are part of a spiritual community, there are certain words and texts that are specific to that religious community. Perhaps a great example is the term “กรรม” —Karma. In general usage, this term is understood as an action leading to bad consequences in the present or future.³² However, in the context of Buddhism, Karma is complicated by concepts that have deeper and more complex functions. Suwanna Satha-Anand points out at the “theory of karma in Buddhism is certainly an attempt to offer moral justice for the rights and wrongs of the individuals. However, karma’s inherent relation with rebirth places it beyond the epistemic scope of a philosopher to offer any

³¹ Pitchapa Smutradontri and Savitri Gadavanij, “Fandom and identity construction: an analysis of Thai fans’ engagement with Twitter,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 7, no.177 (2020): 1-13; Natthanai Prasannam, “The Yaoi Phenomenon in Thailand and Fan/Industry Interaction,” *Plaridel* 16, no. 2 (2019): 63-89; Thandao Wongseree, “Understanding Thai fansubbing practices in the digital era: a network of fans and online technologies in fansubbing communities,” *Perspectives* 28, no.4 (2020): 546.

³² Office of the Royal Society, s.v. “กรรม” [Karma], accessed April 14, 2021, <https://dictionary.orst.go.th>

consistent explanation.”³³ For Thai Buddhist believers, Karma is not just an unfortunate consequence of one’s action, but it rather involves the understanding of Buddhist elements and morality to be responsible for what one has done.

Similarly, the world of K-pop fandom in Thailand has a unique vocabulary and phrases of its own. For instance, when referring to their favorite members of K-pop groups, Thai fans use the term, “เมน” – “main” instead of “bias” as other international fans use. Another interesting term along these lines is “เหนือเมน” – “above main,” or bias wrecker—which is someone who steals the attention of fans, but when it comes to support, fans will still support their “main.”³⁴ These terms are significant in pointing out whom fans are supporting in particular and explain why fans activities are initiated for a particular member. This type of loyalty to a main idol is similar to staying true to one’s faith and god that is associated with that religion. In this sense, religion and fandom resonate and both play important and valuable roles in culture and society. The rituals of Buddhism involve the practice of merit-making, understanding moral Buddhist concepts, and reciting and chanting traditional texts while K-pop fandom also centers around worship of idols and uses certain terms that describe its unique facets and deeper meanings. At times, fans use these terms as hashtags that trend on Twitter during idols’ birthdays. As with religious devotees, this shared vocabulary amplifies a sense of community.

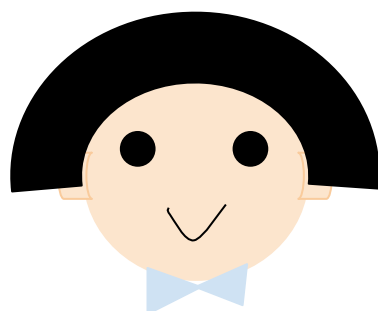
Even though there are these similarities between religious worship and fandom, unfortunately, the two groups are treated completely differently. The significant difference that

³³ Suwanna Satha-Anad, “Karma as Moral Justice in Thai Buddhism,” *Manusya: Journal of Humanities* 5, no. 4 (2002): 72-83, <https://doi.org/10.1163/26659077-00504005>.

³⁴ Workpoint News, “รวมคำศัพท์ฉบับแฟนคลับเกาหลี กับคำศัพท์เฉพาะที่แฟนคลับใช้เรียก” [Glossary of Korean pop culture fan language and specific terms that fans use], published January 21, 2020, <https://workpointtoday.com/fandom/>; Jason Pham, “25 K-Pop Fandom Words Every K-pop Stan Should Know,” published September 4, 2020, <https://stylecaster.com/feature/k-pop-fandom-words-1153522/>.

creates this problem is the differing social perceptions about religion and fandom. While Thai Buddhism is revered and connected with higher social standing and respect, K-pop fandom is stigmatized and linked to lower social standing.

There are various ways that K-pop fans are negatively perceived in Thailand. One form of stereotyping occurs through naming and language. Unlike other sport and Western star



Social perception of
“Ting Kao Lhee”

fandoms, Korean pop culture fans are given a special nickname, “ติ่งเกาหลี— Ting Kao Lhee,” which conveys a negative image of Korean pop culture fan communities. This term is originally derived from “what used to be the regulation haircuts that girls in high school had to have, no longer than earlobe (‘Ting’ is short for ‘Ting Hu’, or earlobe).”³⁵ When the Korean wave started to hit Thailand, “the majority of those who came out to shriek at the singers were high school girls . . . The abbreviated ting now refers to anyone who loves South Korean pop culture, including TV shows and movies though mainly K-pop.”³⁶

Second, there is stigmatization that associates fandom with mental disorders. To depict this projection, “ติ่งเกาหลี— Ting Kao Lhee” is defined along with the psychological perspective of romantic delusion, leading to the Erotomania disorder, on the Department of Mental Health’s website.³⁷ In other words, to be a Korean pop culture fan in Thai society implies one has an

³⁵ Sithikorn Wongwudthianun, “K-pop confidential: Super fans and the craze that consumes them,” *Bangkok Post*, September 12, 2015, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/349563/k-pop-confidential-super-fans-and-the-craze-that-consumes-them>.

³⁶ Sithikorn Wongwudthianun, “K-pop confidential: Super fans and the craze that consumes them.”

³⁷ Nitayaporn.m, “ติ่ง(เกาหลี) ภาวะคลั่งคนติ่ง (Romantic Delusion)” [Korean fans Romantic Delusion], *Department of Mental Health*, published January 24, 2019, <https://www.dmh.go.th/news/view.asp?id=1249>.

abnormality that promotes social contagion of uncommon and deviant behaviors. This stigma must be seen in light of the “inappropriate behaviors” that some K-pop fans seem to engage in, such as staking out and waiting at the airport, screaming to welcome idols at the gate, disturbing other passengers, bribing airport officers, or sneaking into the unauthorized areas to see their idols as close up as possible.³⁸ There is also the obvious case when one violates security protocols at an airport. NCT127 fans showed up to send off the group, all standing on luggage carts outside the departure area to get a better glimpse of a group members before they departed.³⁹ The case brought a lot of concern, resulting in tightened security. This even reinforces the immature, fanatic and problematic image of fans, which contradicts the proper image of Thai women to be reserved. It is worsened by hate speech towards Thai K-pop fangirls, “branding them to have indecent behaviors” such as คลั่งผู้ชาย—obsessing with men—expressed in a public online forum.⁴⁰ As such, fan behavior is often viewed as the opposite or in contradiction

³⁸ Kapook, “2 สาวคิงเกิ้ลลิมอบตัวแล้ว เจอข้อหาหนัก-- ทอท. ทุ่ม 2 ล้าน รื้อระบบความปลอดภัยใหม่” [2 Ting Kao Lhee surrendered to the police and would be charged – AOT with 20-million-baht plan to restructure their security], accessed March 9, 2021, <https://highlight.kapook.com/view/178083>; Brighttv, “แบบนี้ก็ได้เหรอ? แฟนคลับแปะชื่อจองพื้นที่สนามบิน” [Can we do it like this? Fanclub reserved the airport area by putting the nametag on the floor], published October 1, 2018, <https://www.brighttv.co.th/entertain/แบบนี้ก็ได้เหรอ-แฟน>; Khaosod, “เพ้อใจ! ดั่งไปรอรับศิลปิน แปะกระดาษจองที่กรีด เต็มพื้นสนามบิน,” [Unbelievable! Ting are waiting to welcome their idols by putting a paper with name on the airport’s floor], published September 29, 2018, https://www.khaosod.co.th/special-stories/news_1620680; MGR Online, “มนุษย์ดั่ง ตามคิดโอปป้า! แปะกระดาษ-วางของ-จองที่ สนามบินหรือตลาดนัด?! [Ting following Oppa! Putting a paper with name, their own stuffs to reserve a place. Is this an airport or a flea market?!] published September 30, 2018, <https://mgronline.com/live/detail/9610000097792>.

³⁹ Bangkok Post, “Suvarnabhumi tightens security after K-pop chaos,” published June 28, 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1703748/suvarnabhumi-tightens-security-after-k-pop-chaos>

⁴⁰ Nutch Singpolanantachai and Kosum Omphornuwat, “How K-pop Fangirls Branded Vile Thai Social Values,” paper presented at the 20th National Graduate Research Conference, Khon Kaen University, March 2019, <https://app.gs.kku.ac.th/gs/th/publicationfile/item/20th-ngrc-2019/HMO12/HMO12.pdf>

to the ethics and morality of religion and the behavioral expectations under the patriarchal Thai society.

While this behavior is admittedly extreme, it is sometimes blown out of proportion. Moreover, these fans represent only a small portion of the overall fan base. To criticize this group would be akin to criticizing a religion due to the anomalous behavior of a small group of religious extremists. And ironically, the activities of Thai K-pop fandoms are looked down upon even though these activities bear striking similarities to Thai Buddhist practices. This is exemplified in a study using an example of uncle Jook who keeps wearing amulets up to at least 100 pieces, weighing around 4 kilograms, and claims that his quality of life has been much improved thanks to these amulets.⁴¹ The owner of these amulets firmly upholds his belief in sacred power, which implies again that through the medium of amulets, good health, luck and protection will be possessed. This clearly illustrates a stark contrast to non-attachment, neglecting Buddhist core concepts and heavily emphasizes the dependence on buying commodities to induce magical power. If fans, however, exhibit this type of extreme behavior such as idolatry, they are seen as crazy. But in a religious context, such an extreme behavior is usually not thought of as abnormal but rather personal *Sattha*—faith. This is just one concrete example of how people’s perceptions are filtered by a hypocritical lens that distorts their ability to view religion and fandom as equivalent forms of faith.

⁴¹ รัก-ยม, “เชื่อ...คงกระพัน ศรัทธาพระของปู่ห้อยคอหนัก 4 กก.” [Believe in eternity: The faith in Buddha by a grandpa who wears 4 kg. amulets,” *Thairath*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.thairath.co.th/lifestyle/amulet/1949500>.

Money: Bridge to Spiritual Comfort

While there are clearly some general parallels between religion and fandom, this particular research focuses one of the most striking, significant connections: how money can create a bridge to spiritual comfort. For Thai Buddhists and for K-pop fans, money is used to gain spiritual comfort. In religion this is seen as a form of merit-making, but for K-pop fans money spending is seen as frivolous and superficial. Nothing is better to explain the life of Thai K-pop fans than, “เสียเป็นแสน แชนไม่ได้จับ— Sia Pen Saen Khaen Mai Dai Jab,” which means that you spend hundred thousands of dollars worth of money, yet you cannot even shake your idols’ hands. It depicts that money may lead to a concrete form of happiness, but at the same time the object of that happiness is untouchable. For this reason, this is a famous quote used to disregard most activities of Thai K-pop fans, and it is firmly embedded in general perceptions towards fan communities as those who engage in “ไร้สาระ — Rai Sara,” meaning nonsense. Nevertheless, Thai K-pop fans view that money spent in exchange for their happiness is worthwhile, whether it’s through buying products, music, or otherwise.

We can gain further insight into this phenomenon by applying Daniel Chandler’s explanation of how meanings are interpreted and create signs that “take the form of words, images, sounds, odors, flavors, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we invest them with meaning.”⁴² We consider official goods and merchandise as signs, physical objects that we invest with personal and cultural meanings. Fanlights or lightsticks, known as 봉 – bong which literally means stick, are the utmost important identifier of each fandom. A fanlight might just appear to be a normal item, but they

⁴² Daniel Chandler, “Semiotics for Beginners,” *cs. Princeton*, last modified August 1, 2019, <https://www.cs.princeton.edu/~chazelle/courses/BIB/semio2.htm>

become sacred and meaningful for K-pop fans who gain a sense of membership and belonging through them. Even though fans have to pay for fanlights, they are sure to get sentimental value back in exchange. On top of that, official fanlights are a part of marketing strategy for a parent company of K-pop idol groups. For example, prior to the concert EXO Planet 3—The EXO'rDIUM, EXO members released several YouTube clips to instruct EXO-L how to dance in “Tender Love” along with fanlights (fig.4).



From left to right: NCT fanlight, WayV fanlight, EXO fanlight ver. 2, EXO fanlight ver. 3

Similarly, NCT127 also released an official fanlight user manual clip for their NCT 127 WORLD TOUR'NEO CITY—The Origin (fig. 5), NCT DREAM made a fan chant guide with the use of fanlights clip for their concert—The DREAM SHOW (fig. 6)—and WayV members made a YouTube clip of decorating their fanlights (fig. 7). All these activities imply that as a fan, fanlights are a-must-have item to properly worship the idols on the stage with the rest of the fan community. To attend a concert without a fanlight is functionally equivalent to joining Buddhist activities without the thought of making merit through cash donations or purchasing and lighting incense.

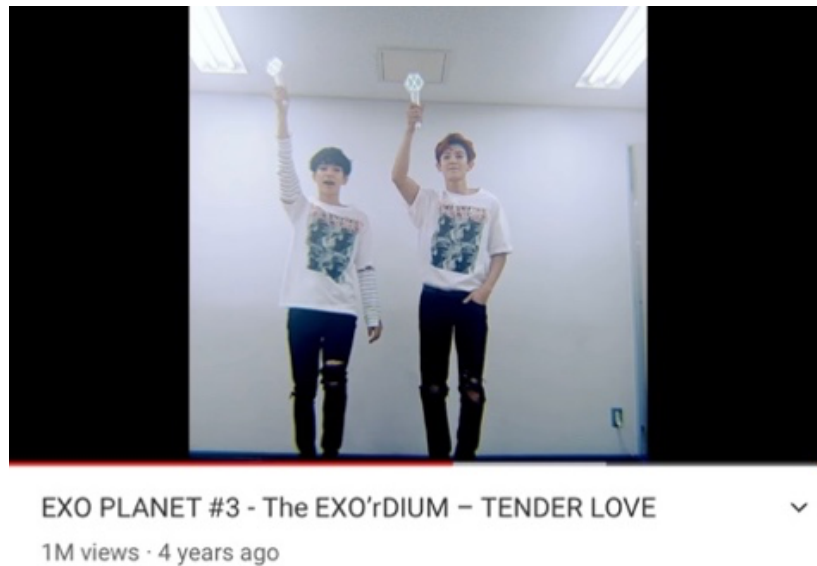


Figure 4. EXO's Baekhyun and Chanyeol released an official clip of how to dance to "Tender Love" with fanlights. SMTOWN, "EXO PLANET #3 – The EXO'rDIUM—TENDER LOVE," YouTube Video, 1.08, July 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUeAV3YgmCA>.



Figure 5. NCT127 Johnny released an official fanlight user manual for their first concert. NCT 127, "OFFICIAL FANLIGHT User Manual 127 WORLD TOUR 'NEO CITY – The Origin'," YouTube Video, 1.12, April 23, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WEgu2GCOWQ>.



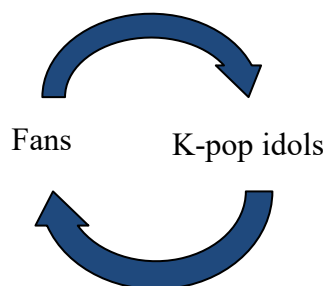
Figure 6. NCT DREAM made a fan chant guide clip with the use of fanlights. 채널 NCT DAILY, “★THE DREAM SHOW★"너와 나" 응원법♥ (Song by. NCT DREAM) | Fanchant Guide,” YouTube Video, 3:45, November 9, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ss0jqAN7w58>.



Figure 7. WayV TEN and YangYang made a DIY fanlight clip. WayV, “[WayV-ariety] 威神么这样: DIY Fanlight!” YouTube Video, 45:00, May 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UpGzjiKIaI&t=19s>.

Other than having fanlights to represent membership and belonging to the K-pop fan communities, buying albums of K-pop groups, their subunits or solos is another extremely important fan activity to show support and loyalty. Since fans hold to the symbolic motto that

Economically and spiritually support
And act as a backbone



“the happiness of idols is our happiness, and the success of idols are also our pride,” they tend to do everything they can to make their idols happy. That probably explains the importance of bulk buying and fundraising and casting votes as essential collective fan activities that boost sales, so that these will contribute to calculations linked to awards. For example, Twitter user, TenThailand, on

Providing happiness and spiritual comfort

gathered a donation (44 albums at 25,138.61 baht =

\$812.03) and made a bulk purchase (477 albums) in the name of TEN’s THAI FANS (total of 521 albums) to support the recent WayV’s 3rd Mini Album “Kick Back.”⁴³ Most importantly, albums and online voting are counted towards major annual awards, especially Daesang,⁴⁴ which is considered to be the biggest and highest achievement for K-pop artists in the entertainment industry. EXO’s Baekhyun, while accepting their 4th consecutive Daesang in 2017, made a touching speech to thank their fans, saying that, “we are consistently working so that [*our fans*] will laugh, be happy and just be proud of EXO.”⁴⁵ Suho who is EXO’s leader similarly mentioned that “because of EXO-L that we are able to stand here today. We would be nothing if

⁴³ Ten Thailand (@Ten_TH), “TEN THAILAND has ordered WavV 3rd Mini Albums “Kick Back” in the name of TEN’s THAI FANS,” Twitter, March 12, 202, 4.30 pm., https://twitter.com/Ten_TH/status/1371030991729401858

⁴⁴ Nathalie Morin, “K-pop 101: The Terms You Need to Know Before You Stan,” *Refinery*, published June 29, 2019, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/k-pop-music-fans-terms-meaning>. Daesung (대상) is a grand award that is given at two end-of-year award ceremonies: the Golden Disk Awards and Seoul Music Awards.

⁴⁵ GIGI, “EXO Achieves a Daesang All Kill!” *OfficiallyKmusic*, January 21, 2017, <http://officiallykmusic.com/exo-achieves-daesang-kill/> (emphasis added).

we didn't have you guys.”⁴⁶ Thai fans also responded to the award that EXO received in a similar way such as “we made it Baekhyun! We got one Daesang! Are you happy? I'm also very happy!”⁴⁷ and “#VOTEforEXOTH Daesang will belong to EXO if EXO-L hold each other's hand tightly and walk together with EXO. We can do it because we have been doing all along.”⁴⁸ This illustrates the mutual economic and spiritual support between K-pop fans and idols, which is similar to that between monks and laymen as described above. K-pop fans donate money for bulk purchases or voting and buy albums to support their idols for these awards while fans receive sentimental rewards from their idols in the form of sincere speech and audience recognition. K-pop idols then becomes an intermediary to bring happiness to fans. At the same time, the social distance between K-pop fans and their idols is perhaps comparable to the distance between Buddhist believers and the spiritual entities and forces they call upon. K-pop fans are happy to be an active fan supporting their idols while Buddhist devotees receive spiritual support through their meritorious activities. Both, while “non-responsive” to a degree, are understood to appreciate the activities undertaken on their behalf.

Finding Happiness and Comfort: Donations and Gatherings

In looking at these fan activities we see another shared goal with religious practice: the search for inner peace, happiness, comfort, and the strength and satisfaction of participating in a community. One level of this is the search for and discovery of internal meaning for good deeds

⁴⁶ Baeklightt0506, “[ENG] 171202 EXO Artist of the Year Speech at MMA,” YouTube Video, 8.36, December 2, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HACmMy4qrM>

⁴⁷ 쿵이 (@vivapoppins), “I'm crying. We made it, Baekhyun,” Twitter, September 20, 2017, 8.30 pm., <https://twitter.com/vivapoppins/status/910489616922185729>

⁴⁸ 엑소그랜드컴백2020_P'Ked (@Ked_missEXO), “VOTEforEXOTH Daesang will belong to EXO,” Twitter, December 9, 2017, 5.23 pm., https://twitter.com/Ked_missEXO/status/939440234927767558

done. This can manifest itself in the idea of donation for causes that represent the greater good. To give a clearer picture of how fan happiness appears in physical form—in a similar way that merit manifests itself in the context of Thai Buddhism—we can look into the collective efforts of charitable solicitations, which explain why Thai fans band together and willingly spend money on several projects. These range from Birthday projects on billboards and subway stations,⁴⁹ TukTuk such as happy birthday advertisements of NCT/WAYV Ten on TukTuk in 2019 (fig. 8); NCT/WayV Lucas on รถสองแถว, a pick-up truck taxi, in 2019 (fig. 9); NCT Dream Renjun on TukTuk and รถสองแถว, a pick-up truck taxi in 2021 (fig. 10) and putting banners on street vendors to military enlistment projects like for EXO's Chanyeol on รถแห่—sound truck—on March 28, 2021 (fig. 11). This symbolizes distinct the creativity and special support that only fans in Thailand could make possible.⁵⁰ K-pop fans then act as intermediaries who promote their idols and show great community support, which comes in the form of donations. In a religious context, donations are considered or believed to be a part of merit-making. There is little difference from Buddhists donating 20 baht (less than a dollar) or 100 baht (around \$4) in temple donation boxes in order to build monasteries or to serve underprivileged communities. Likewise, fan donations represent a way of doing meritorious activities in the name of idols and important social causes. For instance, 10vely, a special fan name of NCT/WayV Ten, donated 301,622 baht (\$9,742.44) within 7 days to Limited Education project,⁵¹ or some made donations to The Mirror Foundation to help homeless get jobs, a movement which consisted of several fans such as @10for10project

⁴⁹ For political reasons, Thai K-pop fans have started to donate and put banners on street vendor carts instead of supporting big conglomerates that side with the corrupt government.

⁵⁰ News articles often regard Bangtan (BTS) as the first fandom to announce the placement of ads on Tuktuks. I would oppose this claim since it is obviously Thai NCTzens who initially started doing this in 2019. However, it is true that BTS fans sparked this movement and therefore garnered public attention.

⁵¹ Limitededucation (@limitededucati1), “Successfully done! 301,622 baht within 7 days,” Twitter, March 5, 2021, 11.43 am., <https://twitter.com/limitededucati1/status/1367697149983481856>

(NCT/WayV Ten fans) who gathered 31,835 baht (\$1,028.26) for Ten's Birthday,⁵² and @fourjw (NCT Jungwoo Thai fans) who gathered 5,000 baht (\$161.49) for Jungwoo's Birthday.⁵³ This indicates the collective desire of fans to engage in social performative activities that provide something beneficial to society while enacting positive public relations and demonstrating social responsibility as representative of those in the K-pop community.



Figure 8. Happy Birthday project for NCT/WayV TEN on Tuktuk. JK.Kouzp (@TDBearq), “Wow These are projects by Thai fans,” Twitter, February 25, 2019, 11.56 pm., <https://twitter.com/TDBearq/status/1100077138298859520?s=20>.

⁵² มูตนิกรจากไทย (@Mirror_org), “Big thanks to Ten Chittaphon Leechaiyapornkul and fans (@10for10project) for donation,” Twitter, February 27, 2021, 6.55 pm., https://twitter.com/Mirror_org/status/1365631733102616586

⁵³ มูตนิกรจากไทย (@Mirror_org), “KimJungwoo and Thai Ajiduel @fourjw donated 5,000 baht,” Twitter, March 1, 2021, 11.49 am., https://twitter.com/Mirror_org/status/1366249230805790722



Figure 9. A Happy Birthday project for NCT/WayV Lucas. The price starts at 2,400 baht – USD80. Mango Zero, “เปิดราคาป้ายโฆษณาจะ HBD ไอ้ดอกลดต้องให้เงินเท่าไร” [Revealing the ads price- How much do you need to put happy birthday ads?], Line Today, 14 June 2019, <https://today.line.me/th/v2/article/kPQLrw>.



Figure 10. A Happy Birthday project for NCT DREAM RENJUN on รถสองแถว, a pick-up truck taxi. 0323TH STATION (@0323thStation), “The story of #DearMarchBoyRenjun,” Twitter, March 20, 2021, 3 pm., <https://twitter.com/0323thStation/status/1373182587913433091>.



Figure 11. Military enlistment project for EXO's Chanyeol on รถแห่—a sound truck. 자기야 잉크 (@inkpinkgirl), “Project for P’Chanyeol’s military enlistment,” Twitter, March 21, 2021, 7.29 pm., <https://twitter.com/inkpinkgirl/status/1373612709451722756>

Interestingly, if we carefully examine K-pop fans attendance at unofficial fan meetings, it is quite similar to Buddhist devotees who participate in special events at temples. Both are faith-based activities that only particular members of that community are interested in taking part in while likely seen as irrelevant to outsiders. Activities such as café events that include giving out and exchanging free giveaways or buying drinks to get special gifts or cup sleeves to celebrate birthdays or anniversaries of K-pop idols are common. Those outside the realm of fandom might consider these activities as ridiculous and unreasonable even though they do not seem much different in intent from Buddhist activities.

Just as religious devotees go to temples to practice worship towards inner peace while being part of a community so do fans engage in such rituals. To better understand the in-depth details of fan unofficial meetings and real-life experiences of being a Thai K-pop fan, I attended and participated in three café events: NCT/WayV Ten’s birthday mini gallery (fig. 12),

TaeyongxTen 0127 café event (fig. 13) and NCT/WayV Lucas's birthday event (fig. 14). Those who attend either NCT/WayV Ten or Lucas' birthday events are fans of Ten or Lucas. There was the frequent appearance of dolls that resemble Ten, especially "Tennyang" known in Thai "เท็นยวเตนลี่" (fig. 15) and resemble Lucas (fig. 16). These, we can assume, represent a sign of membership since this is not what "all" K-pop fans willing to purchase. The café event of TaeyongxTen 0127 event confirmed that a certain event is for a particular group of people. Not all fans of NCT/WayV Ten or Taeyong attend this as only fans who love both Taeyong and Ten engage in this event. These three events shared one considerable similarity to listening to sermons at temples: if you are not interested in or are not dedicated Buddhist devotees, you will not join such events. In other words, fan events and Buddhist activities target only members of their communities.

Another remarkable connection is how money is centralized around fan activities. In order to get a cup sleeve or special gift, participating fans must purchase drinks or food at the venue. Examples of these gifts were placed on the counter so that when a fan orders drinks or food, they would notice right away (fig. 17) and (fig. 18). To my surprise, fans did not hesitate to ask how much they should buy to get these gifts for and purchased them right away. Even more interesting, at Lucas's birthday event, in order to get special giveaways, fans were required to show "Lucas' Bubble." Dear U Bubble is a feature on Lysn application⁵⁴ (fig. 19), which simulates one-on-one conversation and makes the paid fans feel that they receive special treatment because not every fan is willing to pay for subscription service. These types of activities hold symbolic and cultural meaning. In other words, one's love, loyalty and support

⁵⁴ Lysn is a community connecting idol groups and fans, in which fans need to pay to be ACE members so that they can get an exclusive photo or specific message from members of a group.

need to be proved through financial support. This then involves the capitalist-driven market, in which idols are products and their every aspect of life can be sold to fans, who maximize the access of official channels to become, or at least, feel closer to idols. In most cases, there is no real harm done when fans of K-pop idols through the use of money. However, one must be careful to understand that money has limitations, and one cannot buy happiness. What is important here is the idea of intent. If K-pop fans are giving their money out of a spirit of heartfelt gratitude and generosity, with the expectation of nothing in return, then real happiness can emerge. If they, however, believe that money is the only option to get closer to idols, this can be toxic and lead only to disappointment.



Figure 12. NCT/WayV Ten mini gallery and birthday event. (attended on 02/28).



Figure 14. TaeyongxTen 0127 café event (attended on 02/28).



Figure 13. NCT/WayV Lucas Birthday café – The ILLUMEREMCE (attended on 03/07).



Figure 15. The most famous doll that resembles Ten, “Tennyang” known in Thai as “เหมียวเตนส์.”



Figure 16. Dolls that resemble Lucas, which could be found throughout this café event.

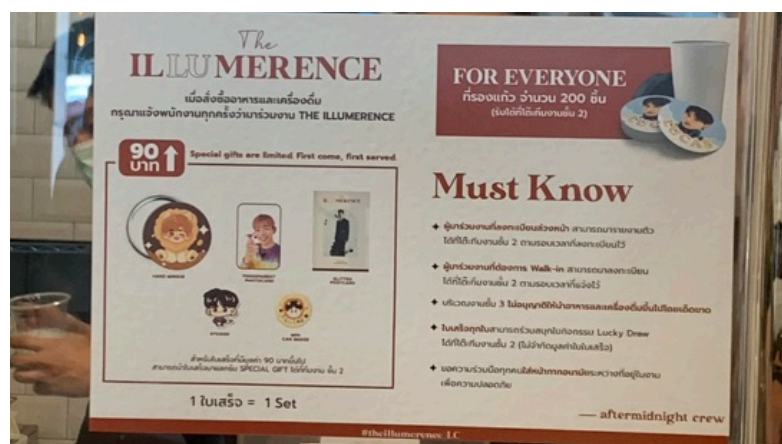


Figure 17. The instruction of how to get special gifts was placed at the cashier window to grab fans' attention.

Fans of Lucas needed to purchase food or drinks at least 90 baht (around \$3) in one receipt to get a set of special gifts. (NCT/WayV Lucas Birthday café – The ILLUMERENCE).



Figure 18. Special gifts were place on the cashier counter for fans to notice right away (TaeyongxTen 0127 café event).

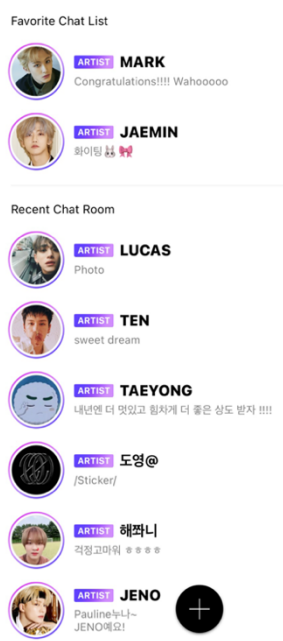


Figure 19. An Example of “Bubble.”

Bubble allows fans to send and to receive realistic texts, photos, voice messages and videos from idols to which they subscribe even though all fans receive the same message.

Official merchandise such as posters and photo cards that come as bonuses when purchasing albums, concert goods and photobooks make important contributions to our spiritual comfort and create sentimental values and happiness for us as K-pop fans. When those goods are sold out, there is less likely chance they will be restocked, which means that they become “rare.”

Hence, given limited time and quantity, K-pop fans feel it is necessary for them to purchase these, and also it perhaps further indicates how dedicated they are as a fan of particular idols' groups. Additionally, to be able to own these official merchandise gives a sense of exclusivity for us as fans.

As mentioned earlier, photocards are “bonuses” that come with albums as they are simply a special gift to thank fans who buy their albums. However, some Thai K-pop fans put more value on the photocards than the albums themselves. Buying an album is a direct way to support their idols so that they can win awards and be “happy.” Nevertheless, photocards turn out to be a crucial factor to determine the happiness and spiritual comfort of K-pop fans, specifically among Thai NCTzens. The rarer they are, the more in demand they become, which results in certain photocards being overpriced. A great example here is the high price of NCT DREAM's Jeno photocard from NCT 2020 [RESONANCE] PT. 2 2nd Kihno Album Arrival version, which Thai NCTzens called เจโน่ตายิ้ม—Jeno's Eye Smile (fig.20). There was an auction for this card, limited to 3,000 baht (\$96), which the highest was 2,927 baht (\$93) though the owner of this card stated that she would select the number that she liked.⁵⁵ Another account also offered a dealing price for this Jeno's Eye Smile photocard at 2,750 baht (\$88), which was already sold out less than an hour—the post was made at 2:57 pm on March 28, 2021, and it was sold at 3:14 pm on March 28, 2021.⁵⁶ This indicates that Thai NCTzens are willing to spend as much as money they need to in order to manifest happiness through these photocards.

⁵⁵ Bumbie (@bumbie_127), “offering price for Jeno's Eye Smile photocard,” Twitter, March 9, 2021, 8.41 pm., https://twitter.com/bumbie_127/status/1369282102651351046.

⁵⁶ daisyJ (@imyourdaisyj), “already deal but not ready to ship: Jeno's eye smile,” Twitter, March 28, 2021, 2.57 pm., <https://twitter.com/imyourdaisyj/status/1376080980843188227>.

This type of activity strikingly resembles the purchase of Thai Buddha amulets. Amulets are a form of collectible—the longer it takes to buy and the rarer it is to find, the more the price of the amulets will increase. Mana Kongwutpanya, former member of the House of Representatives, who is an expert in collecting Buddha amulets, confirms this as he explains that one of the most popular amulets, Phra Somdet Rakang, is so popular that the cost has skyrocketed. He described that two of these amulets were sold to one company in 200 million baht (\$6 million).⁵⁷ Similarly, the case of many devotees queuing up to get the pre-emption certificate for Lhuang Phor Thongsuk at Wat Nhongkor (fig.21) illustrates how the belief in physical objects and their magical power intertwine with worship and underscores the willingness to spend money for spiritual comfort. Those who came to get the pre-emption certificates all agree that they would like to get this amulet to ensure that their business will be prosperous, opulent and to protect them from all dangers.⁵⁸

Not only are these K-pop fans crucial in contributing to the trendy image of Korean pop music, but they also boost the sale of certain products that they starred in the advertisements.⁵⁹ Thus, fan activities and supports normally centralize around capitalist marketing. The following cases exemplify a form of consumption in which fans buy goods, products and outfits that K-pop idols present, recommend and use. The more consumption, the higher the level of devotion to idols and their groups. One notable instance is โทเนอร์พีจูน—Toner P’Jun. EXO’s leader SUHO is

⁵⁷ Thairath online, “5 สุดยอดพระเครื่องแห่งยุค ผ่านกาลเวลายิ่งทวีมูลค่า” [the best 5 amulets that the longer it takes, the price will be higher], published March 18, 2020, <https://www.thairath.co.th/news/business/1794359>.

⁵⁸ MGR Online, “ชาวบ้านทั่วสารทิศแห่เข้าคิวรับใบจองวัดมุนจลวัดหนองจ้อ ทำราคาซื้อต่อสูงยันหลักหมื่น” [People all around places came to get the pre-emption certificate for amulets at Wat Nhongkor, making the price up to 10 thousand], published December 6, 2020, <https://mgronline.com/local/detail/9630000125069>.

⁵⁹ Ubonrat Siriyuvasak and Shin Hyunjoon, “Asianizing K-pop: Production, consumption and identification patterns among Thai youth,” 114; Eun Mo Byun, “Impact of K-pop Celebrity Endorsement on Thai Brand Image” (Paper, ASBBS Annual Conference, Las Vegas, NV, February 2014).

well-known for his fair and smooth skin. He once recommended to fans on his Instagram live that “this toner is good. You should try.” Then, it became super popular not only in Korea, but also in Thailand. Thai fans do not really know the actual name of this brand, but they refer to this product by his name. Another case is when NCT’s leader Taeyong showed his Jellycat Bunny Tulip Pink 67 cm on his Vlive, Thai fans then started to find out where to buy and ordered it. The Thai official Facebook page, Jellycat Thailand, even called this “Taeyong’s generation,” suggesting that this is well-known and sold out because of NCT Taeyong’s fans (fig. 22). Through these activities, K-pop fans bring their idol’s lifestyles into their real lives and feel closer to their idols.

This section demonstrates how money has a strong connection to spiritual comfort among Thai fans of EXO and NCT. Thai K-pop fans support their idols through money and as a means of happiness. Strikingly similar to mutual concession in the Thai Buddhist context, K-pop idols need economic and spiritual support from fans, which can either come in intangible or visible forms, to continue pursuing their dreams in the entertainment industry. K-pop fans, on the other hand, show love to their idols without expecting anything in return, and that idea motivates them to buy albums, official merchandise, create and buy unofficial merchandise and arrange unofficial events and celebrate special events, even though their idols might not know this. All these activities could not be possible without economic resources.



Figure 20. NCT DREAM Jeno's smiling eye photocard. Cookies (@hcmysun), “[SCAN] NCT 2020 RESONANCE pt.2 #JENO Arrival + Departure Kihno photocard,” Twitter, January 23, 2021, 12.46 pm., <https://twitter.com/hcmysun/status/1352855179331211264>.



Figure 21. Devotees gathered around Wat Nhongkor to get the pre-2nd emption certificate for amulet “Phra Lhuang Suk.” Thairath online, “วัดเทพแดก แห่ของพระหลวงปู่สุข วัดหนองขี้” [Crowded at temple to get the pre-emption certificate for Phra Lhuang Suk at Wat Nhongkor], published April 5, 2021, https://www.thairath.co.th/video/news/topnews/hotclip/499507?cx_testId=45&cx_testVariant=cx_1&cx_artPos=2&cx_rec_section=undefined&cx_rec_topic=undefined&utm_source=REC_WIDGET#cxrecs_s.



Figure 22. Jellycat Bunny Tulip Pink 67 cm that NCT Taeyong showed in his Vlive becomes popular among Thai NCTzen. JellycatThailand, “Jellycat Bunny Tulip Pink 67 cm รุ่นแทยองเข้ามาแล้วนะคะ” [Jellycat Bunny Tulip Pink 67 cm Taeyong’s generation has arrived], Facebook, February 24, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/JellycatThailand/posts/1132822847153655>.

Pilgrimages: Paths Towards Fulfillment

A pilgrimage is a ritualistic performance that involves a journey to a well-known or respected place. For some religious devotees, such as Muslims who visit Mecca for Hajj, it is expected that they visit this sacred once in their lifetimes in order to connect with various dimensions of their spirituality and morality. However, the modern pilgrimage differs from its original aim. It is no longer just about visiting designated sacred places for religious purposes, but it is also now often reframed as a form of tourism. The journey is centered less around the original purposes of pilgrimages and now has diverse purposes and forms. These often revolve around certain worship practices and goals that bring about various types of spiritual comfort that will ease one’s physical and spiritual suffering. Some pilgrimages involve just a short time of travel, and these temporary stays or journeys bolster the economy and tourist industry.

Pilgrimages to India and Nepal, which are considered to be the land of origins of Buddha, are not required of all Buddhist devotees in order to practice their faith. This contrasts to the practice of Hajj, which is required for all Muslims to perform it once in their lifetime. Some devotees, however, do go on pilgrimages to India and Nepal to follow the footsteps of Buddha and realize their religious goals. Nevertheless, this paper examines one form of pilgrimage practiced by today Thai Buddhists, which is to visit sacred sites such as temples and shrines and/or places where devotees can pay respect to famous monks. To better illustrate the importance of visiting sacred sites as a form of pilgrimage, I can draw from my own afternoon visit to Erawan Shrine on February 28, 2021. Here, I observed what worshippers did (fig. 23). Erawan shrine, prior to the COVID-19, has been known for welcoming lots of international and domestic tourists from the early morning until night. Even during this period, several Thai worshippers still visit and worship the shrine housing the Hindu god of builder, Phra Phrom. He has 4 faces which symbolize different directions and contain different cultural meanings for worshippers. The security guard at Erawan shrine explained to me that turning clockwise, his front face signifies career and general wishes, his second face indicates romance, his third face is for those who ask for wealth and his fourth face is for health. Due to the economic hardship during COVID-19 lockdown, it is not surprising at all to see the majority of worshippers purchase yellow flowers, joss sticks and candles, and gather around third face signifying wealth (fig. 24). Erawan shrine might be one of the most popular sacred shrines, but it does not provide an answer to every question. Some might find deities who serve a certain purpose, which is demonstrated by those who visit and worship Trimurati Shrine—the God of love, Ganesha, or Lord of success. Situated in front of shopping malls and hotels, these and other sacred places receive attention from those who seek romance or companionships and career especially for celebrities and students

respectively.⁶⁰ During Valentine's Day, even under COVID-19 restrictions, devotees showed up to, "pray for a Happy Valentine's Day or a successful match."⁶¹ Therefore, the Buddhist pilgrimage in its modern form tends to emphasize certain end goals of worshippers rather than being focused on honoring the origins of Buddhism and the original intentions of pilgrimage as practice.

Another form of Buddhist pilgrimage is demonstrated through air travel. Thai Airways offered Buddhist pilgrimage flights called holy "flights to nowhere" during Covid-19 restrictions. These were 3 hours non-stop flights on November 30, 2020. Passengers could chant while flying over 99 holy places across 31 provinces, and they received sacred souvenirs such as a prayer book and a Buddha amulet.⁶² Not only did this special flight help boost the tourism sector, which was also in line with government's policy, the goal claimed by Wiwat Piyawiroj, executive vice president for THAI's commercial operations, but also, "... 'passengers will receive positive energy from chanting while onboard.'"⁶³ This again suggests that worship is the main activity in a ritual performance that brings about spiritual nourishment among those who believe in certain deities.

⁶⁰ Justin Thomas McDaniel, "Rituals and Liturgies," 156,157.

⁶¹ National, "Lovelorn Bangkokians pray for a Valentine," published February 11, 2021, <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30402532>; The Heart of Hinduism, "The Trimurati," accessed April 16, 2021, <https://iskconeducationalservices.org/HoH/practice/worship/the-trimurti/>. In fact, *Trimurati* in Hindu context does not refer to God of love, but three principal deities: Brahma—the Creator; Vishnu—the Maintainer; and Shiva—the Destroyer.

⁶² Economy class costs 6000 baht (\$193) while Business class costs 10,000 baht (\$321). They were all sold out.

⁶³ Post Reporter, "Skies to open for worshippers," *Bangkok Post*, published November 3, 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/2012775/skies-to-open-for-worshippers>.



Figure 23. Erawan Shrine on February 28, 2021.



Figure 24. Devotees gathered at the third face of Erawan shrine.

Journey to Paradise on Earth

The new modern form of pilgrimage shares connections with the phenomenon of fandom travel, which in many ways resembles a spiritual journey. Certain articles highlight South Korea as a popular travel destination for Thai Korean pop culture fans. Studies by Arada (2016), Orawee and Wasawat (2016) reveal a similar pattern: that there is a high rate of Thai tourists

visiting South Korea, and drama and series settings are one of top three reasons Thai tourists travel to South Korea.⁶⁴ Apart from the influence of K-drama, it seems that according to Lee, Bai and Busser (2019), “pop stars were the main reason to visit the destination and revisit frequently.”⁶⁵ An obvious example is fans visiting Seoul metro station to take a photo with an advertisement featuring their favorite idols, which is purchased through fundraising by fans in order to show support or to celebrate the idols’ birthdays, their upcoming albums or group anniversaries.⁶⁶ Myeondong is reported to constantly have female tourists from other Asian countries “seeking out trinkets emblazoned with the faces of Korean pop stars and actors.”⁶⁷ Still, few studies have carefully how and why Thai K-pop visit South Korea and how this resembles a sort of pilgrimage. This following section introduces South Korea as an important pilgrimage route and discusses the significance of attending K-pop live concerts in Thailand for Thai fans. In these two cases, each destination is defined as the Promised Land in which, “someone expects to find great happiness.”⁶⁸ Consequently, the journey of fans to South Korea

⁶⁴ Arada Taechakasari, “Effects of Korean Television Dramas on the Flow of Thai Tourists in Korea” (master’s thesis, The Graduate School of Bangkok University, 2016), 1-76; Orawee Bunnag and Wasawat Sabaiwan, “South Korea’s Destination Image in Attitudes of Thai Tourists,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Journal, Ubon Ratchathani Rajabhat University* 7, no.1 (2016): 283-299.

⁶⁵ SoJung Lee, Billy Bai and James A. Busser, “Pop star fan tourists: An application of self-expansion theory,” *Tourism Management* 72, (2019): 270- 280.

⁶⁶ YIM HYUN-SU, “ K-POP ads taking over Seoul subway,” *The Jakarta Post*, October 16, 2018, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2018/10/15/k-pop-ads-taking-over-seoul-subway.html>; S. Cho, “Seoul Metro Reveals List Of Idol Groups + Individuals With The Most Subway Advertisements In 2019,” *Soompi*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.soompi.com/article/1392959wpp/seoul-metro-reveals-list-of-idol-groups-individuals-with-the-most-subway-advertisements-in-2019>

⁶⁷ Daniel Tudor, *Korea: The impossible Country*, (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 2018), 283.

⁶⁸ “Promised Land,” in *Oxford Dictionary of English (3 ed.)*, edited by Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2015.
https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199571123.001.0001/m_en_gb0665880?rskey=1X9GWO&result=15

and live concerts bears a striking resemblance to the practice of Thai Buddhists who visit sacred shrines and temples.

First, South Korea is the Land of Paradise, where fan dreams are nearly come true. Thai fans aim to “ตามรอย—tam roi,” meaning to bask in the remnants of the idols’ presence, to follow the footsteps or to experience a living a day in the life of their idols. In this sense, we can imply that idols are looked upon as sort of minor deities. The fans carefully plan their itinerary based on what and where their idols have done. Such unique activity creates a closer connection between K-pop idols and fans who feel that they share more in common with their idols more



Figure 25. Inside “Tapioca” where there are other idols’ autographs.

than before by visiting or experiencing similar places and activities. For example, one of the most popular destinations where they should not have missed when in South Korea for Thai EXO-L is “Tapioca” located in Apkujung (fig. 25). It is a well-known place where EXO’s Sehun shows up regularly. Despite being a very small bubble tea bar with limited seats, the majority of customers are EXO-L who wish to “accidentally” meet Sehun in real life and to view other idol’s autographs. “Milky Yo,”

where EXO’s DO filmed his drama, “Be Positive,”

exemplifies how film locations of dramas with idols are also

popular destinations to visit and to take photos. One Thai fan posted on her Twitter that she got a chance to order the famous flavor which is recommended by D.O, took a photo with props

shown in the drama and talked to the owner of this shop about D.O when he was filming the drama.⁶⁹

Another a must-visit place for Thai K-pop fans is SM building, especially SUM café. Idols with SM Entertainment frequently come to this actual place to practice and sometimes to dine-in at the café. Because of this, fans hope to see their favorites buy some coffee, snacks at SUM Cafe or go to practice rooms with their own eyes. Thai K-pop fans visit SM Town or the SM Building to buy official merchandise and rare goods that are not sold elsewhere, and most importantly, to have a direct experience such as seeing idols' real autographs and real outfits as well as touring the SM museum. Again, this type of activity seems to resemble visits to temples with specific relics that are important to Buddhists or to sacred locations associated with the Buddha in India and Nepal, where devotees can be in the presence of the same holiness and follow the footsteps of Buddha.

K-pop live concerts in Thailand are equivalent to attending spiritual rituals. We may compare a concert site to a temple—both are the center of fan and religious activities. K-pop concerts are a sacred location, where Thai fans express love, devotion, support that creates a reciprocal spiritual bond with their idols. Generally, live concerts, “enhance not only the sense of belonging to a tangible community but also increase a sense of intimacy and exclusivity.”⁷⁰ Furthermore, Westgate claims that, “another benefit to concert attendance is liveness, the idea of

⁶⁹ ทาสคยองซูว (@6002pyc4ever), “Taking my doll to EXO D.O’s favorite yogurt place,” Twitter, December 17, 2019, <https://twitter.com/search?q=%020%23เลี้ยงลูกรอกคยองซูว%20milky%020yo&src=typedquery>.

⁷⁰ Rebecca Bennett, “Live concerts and fan identity in the age of the internet,” in *The Digital Evolution of Live Music*, edited by A.C. Jones and R.J. Bennett, 3-15, Chandos Publishing: 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-100067-0.00001-4>.

seeing and hearing a performance with other fans at the time of its occurrence.”⁷¹ Nevertheless, K-pop live concerts seem to have deeper layers in which enjoyment and excitement are only part



Thai EXO-Ls offered yellow flower wreath to EXO's LAY at The Exo'rdium tour in Bangkok. This shows how close fans can get to their idols during the concert.

of the experience. K-pop fans are able to take selfies and live videos, implying that, “audience members can illustrate how physically close and intimate they get to artists at live gig.”⁷² To attend concerts is then, “. . . influenced by the desire to merely improve the likelihood of getting chance to ‘possibly meet the band’ and ‘shake hands.’”⁷³ We can apply these mindsets to the case of K-pop fans since they presumably are not allowed to take selfies or have a private conversation with the idols in private. As

a result, to attend live concerts could be perceived as the one and only chance for fans to be close to their idols. The more one buys concert tickets and

spends money, the higher the likelihood one will become closer to, connected with or be recognized by one's idols. This case can be applicable to those who get fan signs of video call events several times with idols as well. Undoubtedly, intimacy and exclusivity play a powerful role for K-pop fans who attend concerts, which become a venue for fans to demonstrate their worship of and love and support to the groups.

⁷¹ Christopher Joseph Westgate, “Popular Music Fans and the Value of Concert Tickets,” *Popular Music and Society* 43, no. 1 (2020): 57-77, DOI: [10.1080/03007766.2019.1601152](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2019.1601152)

⁷² Rebecca Bennett, “Live concerts and fan identity in the age of the internet,” in *The Digital Evolution of Live Music*, edited by A.C. Jones and R.J. Bennett, 3-15, Chandos Publishing: 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-100067-0.00001-4>.

⁷³ Steven C. Brown, and Don Knox, “why go to pop concerts? The motivations behind live music attendance,” *Musicae Scientiae*, 21 no. 3, (2017): 233-249.

This experience of going to a concert and praying at a temple shares important things in common. One is the ritualistic repetition of certain words and bodily actions. Buddhist devotees know basic chanting such as Namotassa while K-pop fans are able to sing Korean songs in the concert hall along with idols. In the same manner, devotees light joss sticks and candles before bowing their heads to pay their respects; this resembles the way fans wave fanlights in the concert halls, which creates a sacred feeling of communion and radiance. Based on Twitter posts by Thai EXO-L who attended EXO's concerts in Thailand, popular opinion supports the idea that going to concert really nourishes one's happiness. Most Thai fans expressed their satisfaction, delight and spiritual fulfillments that their mind or soul has not moved from the concert moments and is still stuck at the concert arena.⁷⁴ Twitter user @1004bhyun posted a day after the concert that “this is such an EXO effect that truly has mental consequence to me. *[EXO]* is already back, but I miss them badly. My soul is still at concert venue.”⁷⁵ These examples illustrate almost identical expectation about what both worshippers and concert attendees want to get out of the experience: happiness and spiritual nourishment.

The activities at K-pop concert venues are ritualistic performances that deepen spiritual bonds and project reverence from Thai K-pop fans to their idols. Fan projects and activities are

⁷⁴ @ploytipaa, “my soul is still in Impact Arena. It might take some time to find an exit and return home,” Twitter, March 21, 2018 12.53 pm., <https://twitter.com/ploytipaa/status/976336096865890304?s=20>; มูฟออนแล้ว (@Chompoo11496175), “my body already returns home, but my soul is still waving fanlight at concert arena. I miss them so much,” Twitter, March 21, 2018 3.42 pm., <https://twitter.com/Chompoo11496175/status/976378579565998080>; CHENNie_새벽별, (@poppopoppop55), “it's my body that just returns home. My heart is still at concert. I've been looking at photos all day all nights,” Twitter, March 21, 2018, 12.51 pm., <https://twitter.com/poppopoppop55/status/976335465283338241>

⁷⁵ 백현이 'ㅅ' | (@1004bhyun), “this is such an EXO effect that truly has mental consequence to me,” Twitter, September 23, 2019, 9.56 am., <https://twitter.com/1004bhyun/status/1175967233668866048> (emphasis added).

significant form of expression in support of their idols. If the concert is in or near the birthday month of idols, fans will sing happy birthday song to members and make surprise birthday projects. Fans are also willing to spend money towards their own and their idols' happiness as when Thai EXO-L donated a large amount of money to EXO ThaiFan Union, which was in charge of contacting the head company and then preparing those specialties to EXO and their staff.⁷⁶ Fan projects also represent an expression of Thai fans to let their idols realize the collective support specially from "Thais." In the fourth tour of EXO, EXO Planet 4 — The Elyxion in Bangkok, Thai EXO-L performed card stunts depict a phase, "จากโซลถึงกทม. 3,720 km— from Seoul to Bangkok 3,720 km (fig. 26), which left a tremendous impression on both EXO and Thai EXO-L. The message intended to tell the idols that distance might separate idols and Thai EXO-L, yet both were now reunited in this concert. Thai fans performed card stunts at the NCT DREAM concert in Bangkok Day 1, which depicted the phase, Yo! ♥Dream (fig. 27), and Day 2, the word, 영원히, which means "forever," (fig. 28) were performed as a way to send meaningful messages to their idols. K-pop concerts then serve as a medium involving collective activities that demonstrate love and support from fans. Attending K-pop concerts strengthens the bond between idols themselves and their fandoms. On a certain level, this concert culture justifies why fans cry at the end of concerts or get more emotional during the performances. This case could apply to religious activities that require monks as a mean of ritualistic performances such as offering alms in the morning or large candles and tube lights at the beginning of Buddhist Lent, listening to sermons and ordination. Given these points, the pilgrimage to live

⁷⁶ EXO ThaiFan Union (@exthfan_union), "#ElyxioninBKK total donation of second round on March 9, 102,610.60 baht," Twitter, March 9, 2018, 9.58 pm., https://twitter.com/exothfan_union/status/972124435732824065?s=20.

concerts can resemble sacred religious places that evoke good memories and a sense of nostalgia.



Figure 26. Card Stunt depicts a phase, “จากโซลถึงกทม. 3,720 km— from Seoul to Bangkok 3,720 km, in the fourth tour of EXO, EXO Planet 4 — The Elyxion in Bangkok. หม่ามี้ ft. ลูกชาย (@pmusaL), “from Seoul to Bangkok 3,720 Km.,” Twitter, March 17, 2018, 12.55 am., <https://twitter.com/pmusaL/status/974705853205962752?s=20>.



Figure 27. Card Stunt in NCT DREAM concert Bangkok Day 1. It depicts the phase, “Yo! ♥Dream.” นานาแฉม (@NJamny), “such a beautiful fan project,” Twitter, December 2, 2019, 7.10 pm., <https://twitter.com/NJamny/status/1201111319434289152?s=20>



Figure 28. Card Stunt in NCT DREAM concert Bangkok Day 2. It depicts the word, “영원히” which means forever. #วันนี้NCTไปไหน @whereareyouncnt, “first year anniversary NCT dream performed their first concert in Thailand,” Twitter, December 1, 2020, 7.51 am., <https://twitter.com/whereareyouncnt/status/1333574284539621376?s=20>

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are considerable similarities in the meanings of activities practiced by both Thai Buddhists and Thai K-pop fans despite the social perceptions that places different levels of respect and sacredness on these actions. By investigating the intentions behind religious and fan activities, we can draw interesting parallels about the values and faith practices that Thai Buddhists and K-pop fans share. The broad implication here is that faith is personal and a form of reverence. Unfortunately, general perceptions are greatly affected by the double standard and biases against K-pop fandoms, which underrates, depreciates, and shows disdain for fan activities.

A significant finding is that money appears to be a medium for the interdependent relationships between K-pop fans and idols, between Buddhists and monks and their temples and shrines. Buddhists need monks and temples to obtain merits and to reassure their devotees with blessings and improve their lives while the temple receive economic resources, especially money through cash donations. Likewise, K-pop fans receive happiness and spiritual comfort from idols, who get economic and spiritual support in exchange. In both cases, these groups need each other to represent and to fulfill their faith. If this type of relationship cannot be maintained, neither will receive the benefits.

South Korea and K-pop live concerts are predominant pilgrimage routes and sacred places, which is equivalent to Thai Buddhists visiting India, Nepal, sacred shrines and temples. The practice of pilgrimage that both K-pop fans and Buddhist devotees take not only create and deepen the bond, but also spiritually connect them to their religious or K-pop idols. The desire to follow in the footsteps of idols—whether Buddha or K-pop stars—is the ultimate goal towards completion of the spiritual journey, which leads to happiness and spiritual comfort.

As a whole, these findings suggest that there are sound and shared rationales behind fan and religious activities. K-pop fans should receive considerable respect as well as equal social standing in Thai society. Regardless, future research should unpack other layers of this phenomenon, such as gender dynamics and nationalistic aspects that play a role and help us even better understand K-pop fandoms and religions in Thailand. In addition, we can keep investigating the debate about the relationship between happiness in association with consumer culture and fan activities. In any case, this research legitimizes K-Pop fandom as a legitimate form of faith and opens up avenues for future studies.

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